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DE RUEHJM #1273 1991506  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
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FM AMCONSUL JERUSALEM  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 2157  
INFO RUEHKK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RHEHNSC/WHITE HOUSE NSC PRIORITY

UNCLAS JERUSALEM 001273

SENSITIVE  
SIPDIS

NEA FOR FRONT OFFICE AND IPA, NSC FOR ABRAMS/PASCUAL/SINGH

E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: [KWBG](#) [PHUM](#) [IS](#) [KIRF](#)  
SUBJECT: INCREASE IN UNCOORDINATED ISRAELI VISITS TO  
JOSEPH'S TOMB IN NABLUS

¶1. (SBU) Summary. IDF-escorted visits to Joseph's Tomb in Nablus (Area A) have increased in size and frequency in recent months, according to Palestinian Authority (PA) security officials. Nablus security commanders told PolOff and POL FSN July 16 that they recognize the GOI's right to make coordinated visits to the Tomb, but complain that the IDF provides no notice of visits and employs heavy-handed methods while escorting visitors, to include wide-ranging curfews and temporary occupation of house rooftops. PA officials also complained to PolOff and USSC officers that the IDF has failed to stop unauthorized visits to the Tomb by armed settlers, who have sometimes invaded residents' homes and threatened them with weapons. End summary.

Heavy-Handed IDF Behavior and Settler  
Violence Angers Residents, PA Officials  
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¶2. (SBU) Since late-2007, the frequency of IDF-escorted visits to Joseph's Tomb has increased, according to PA security officials. Nablus National Security Forces (NSF) commander BG Khayri Hassan told POL FSN on July 16 that the IDF puts the area under curfew in advance of escorted visitors, arrival, preventing movement of either residents or PA security forces (PASF). He said the IDF sometimes occupies rooftops of homes near the Tomb during visits, restricting family members from entering certain rooms of their houses.

¶3. (SBU) Other Nablus security officials told PolOff July 16 that armed settlers sometimes enter the Tomb area in eastern Nablus without the IDF, and fire in the air, scaring residents. These officials said on several occasions since January 2007, settlers invaded the homes of residents near the Tomb and damaged their belongings before the IDF arrived and ordered them out.

¶4. (SBU) BG Hassan told POL FSN and USSC officers that the increase in uncoordinated visits and resultant curfews embarrasses the PA and undermines efforts to improve the PASF public image. He said Israeli have the right to visit Joseph's Tomb, but visits must be coordinated with the PA, as the 1995 Interim Agreement requires, and conducted without imposing wide-ranging curfews on residents. BG Hassan urged IDF action against settlers, especially those with weapons, who make unauthorized visits.

Continuing Conflict over Ottoman-Era Shrine  
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¶5. (SBU) Joseph's Tomb is the remains of an Ottoman-era shrine in Nablus near Balata Refugee Camp, built by the Muslim rulers with contemporary recognition of Jewish rights to visit the site. It was under Israeli administration (and had a substantial settler/yeshiva presence) from 1967 to 1995, when pursuant to the Interim Agreement, it was turned

over to PA administration as part of Area A, with provision for Jewish visits pursuant to Interim Agreement Article V and Appendix 4.

¶16. (SBU) From 1995 to 2000, the IDF escorted visitors to Joseph's Tomb and stationed border policemen inside, in coordination with PA security. The IDF abandoned the site in October 2000 (removing sacred Jewish items as they departed) after the second intifadah broke out and the Tomb came under attack from militants. Israeli religious and settler groups subsequently accused Palestinian militants of defacing the Tomb and painting it light green to assert its status as a Muslim holy site.

¶17. (SBU) The IDF restarted infrequent escort of visitors to the site in 2003, putting the area under curfew and sometimes temporarily occupying house rooftops to secure the area during the visits. From 2003 to the present, many Israelis (mostly settlers) have violated Israeli military orders by sneaking into Nablus to visit the Tomb without IDF escort.

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